

# AGNETA AND THE LAKE KING

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It was a summer's day, hundreds of years ago, and the world was a beautiful as it is today. The forest was just as green, the meadows were covered in flowers, and the roses and lilac bushes in the gardens gave out the same wonderful scent. Over all this splendor arched the same blue sky and the summer clouds scudded across it.

At that time there was a castle on an island in the middle of a lake. Firm and stately the red stone walls rose with a radiant golden roof crowning them.

Now the sun was just about to set and the whole sky glowed like a golden lake. Not a soul was to be seen, the castle stood closed and forbidding, only a nightingale sang her song from a high lime-tree in the garden from behind the castle. All was still, not a murmur was heard, the forest was reflected in the still, clear water of the lake. The scent of summer hung heavily, but no one was there to notice it.

Suddenly a little door of the castle opened, and a young girl stepped out. Carefully she went down the steep steps, walked across the courtyard, went through a gate in the wall to the pier which jutted out into the lake. At the end of the pier she stopped and looked across the water.

She was Agneta, the daughter of the lord of the castle, his only child and comfort for the loss of her mother who had died many years earlier. She stood quite still watching the flaming red sun sink into the lake, and asked herself what it must be like in the magical realm of the clouds which changed their form and colour every moment.

But then something happened that brought her attention closer. At her feet the water stirred as a strange form swam towards the pier – was it a large fish, or was it a man? Agneta was about to run back to the castle when the strange figure raised its hands, and revealed a face of such deep sorrow that she stood there and asked in a quivering voice: "Who are you? And how did you get here?"

Large dark eyes looked back at her like the sad eyes of a doe, and around his mouth was a strange smile, but he gave no answer.

"Just tell me who you are!" Agneta repeated. "If I can help you, I will gladly do so, and if I cannot help you myself, perhaps my father can for he is a powerful man."

Then the stranger began to speak: "no, you. You alone can give me peace

and happiness.”

His voice was mild and gentle like a breeze rustling in the sails of a ship. And again he raised his arm in supplication. Agneta had never seen a more beautiful face. Heavy, wet locks framed his cheeks, his purple lips opened to a gentle smile. Most wondrous of all, though, were his eyes. Agneta had never thought eyes could express such sorrow and tenderness. They were like the depths of the lake, which had so often captivated her gaze – one moment dark and mysterious, the next filled with glistening sunlight.

Agneta stepped on to the furthest stones at the edge of the water. “Tell me who you are” she demanded a third time.





Then he replied with a soft voice: "I am the lake king and have lived for hundreds of years in this lake. Long before the castle of your father was built, this was my kingdom. I saw how the scrub on the shore grew into a forest, which now reaches to the sky. Long ago the lake was much bigger and reached far into the land, but it shrank, as does everything that comes into contact with human beings. And nonetheless there is not a lake in the whole wide world as beautiful, as still and as deep as this one."

"Is it not strange down there among the reeds and the water-plants and all the creatures of the lake?" asked Agneta.

"You humans always think like that about places you don't know," the lake king answered. "Actually it's beautiful down there! Much more beautiful than up here on earth. The sun shines twice as clear through the water without burning. And when storms and rain rattle at your houses up here, the bottom of the lake is quiet and still. But much as I'd like to describe my realm, I can only give you a faint impression of what it is really like, you have to see it yourself to believe it."

"But we humans cannot live at the bottom of the lake," said Agneta, and took another step closer to the water.

"That's just what you think, because you have never tried it," said the lake king with a laugh. "I could take you down into the depths without harming you. And I could show you things more wonderful than you can possibly imagine".

He had laid his hands on her little pearly shoes, and looked at her pleadingly.

"No, I don't dare!" sighed Agneta. "My father would get worried and start searching for me. And I want to go home now before the sun sets. Good night!"

"Will you just leave me like that?" called the lake king in a voice full of pain. "Shall I just return to my realm as lonely as ever? At least give me a keepsake to comfort me on my way. Give me the lime blossom you carry in your hand. As long as the scent lasts I shall believe you are close to me."

Agneta stretched out her hand with the lime blossom and said: "Gladly will I give you that. Here, take it."

The lake king reached out for the blossom and took hold of Agneta's hand.

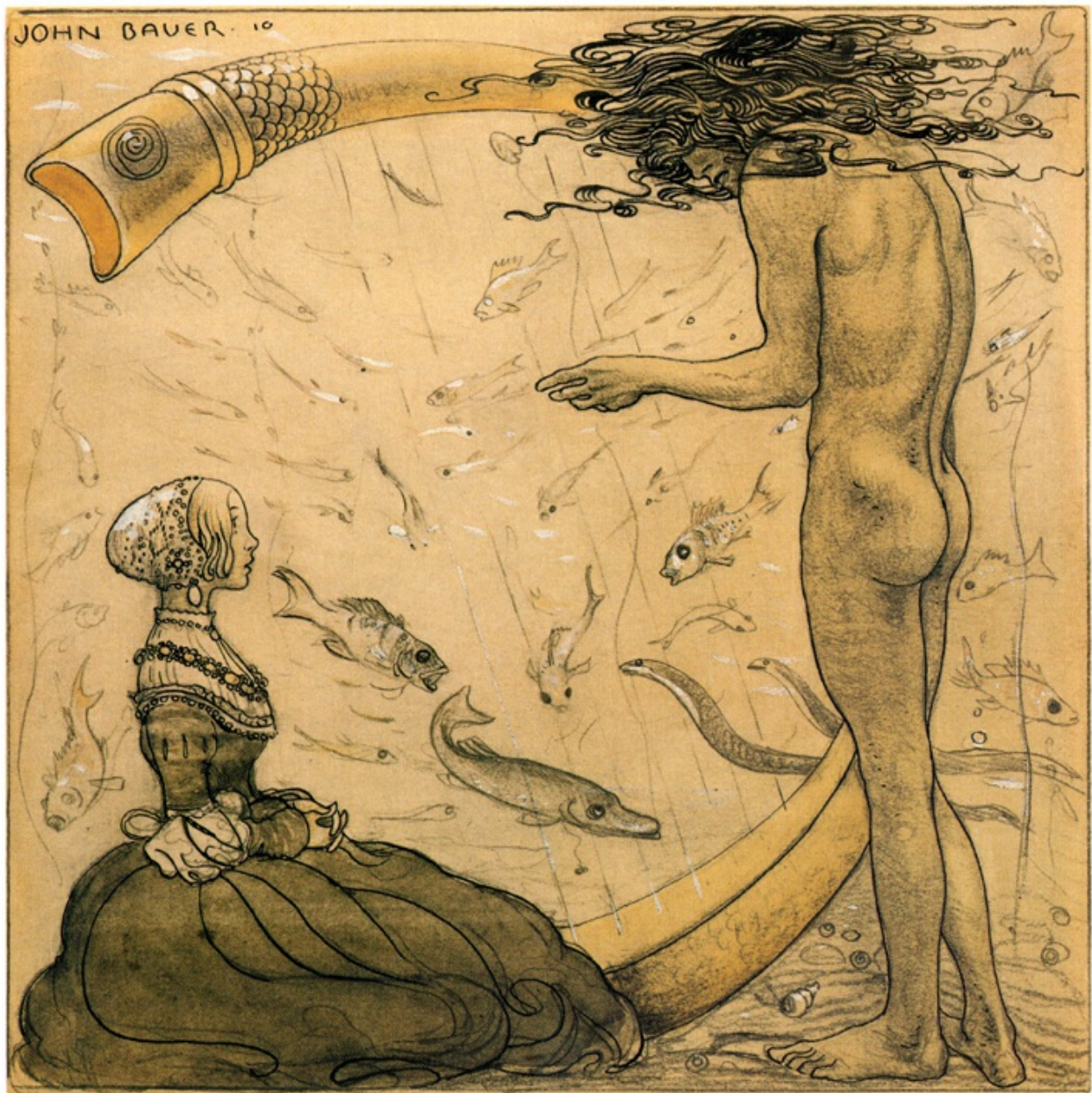
Then he reached for her waist and lifted her up in his arms. She struggled and cried, but he dived down into the depths with her. At the same moment the sun set and soon the clouds paled and night fell.

When Agneta did not come, her father became terribly anxious. He sent a whole party of servants into the park and forest to search for her, but in vain. Finally a little boy found Agneta's pearly shoe by the stones of the pier, and this brought sorrow and tears to the old knight. He feared she had drowned and for days the lake shore was searched in the hope of at least finding her lifeless body. But even this wish was not granted.

Within a few years he aged, and was indifferent to all that happened around him. Usually he walked up and down the pier. On sunny days he looked into the depths of the lake, and some nights he stayed there in the moonlight, moving like a shadow, or standing like a stone, staring hopelessly into the dark waters.

Agneta though had not drowned. She lived in the depths with the lake king and was happy. At first she had been afraid when the lake king pulled her to the depths, but as soon as she reached the bottom, her fear disappeared and the king seemed even more handsome than before. As a water-lily only shows its beauty when swimming on the waves, so the lake king only revealed his true nature in the depths.

And he had not promised too much. Around her little waves sounded like harps. At night when the moon rose the water shimmered like silver, and when the sun rose, everything was illumined in enchanting colours. In a moment thousands of blue sparks lit up, then the light flamed like gold, or glowed turquoise. Then again everything became pale and flowed in lilac streams like summer clouds in the sky.



Wandering among all the strange flowers that grew on the floor of the lake, she would pick a whole bunch and made herself a crown. But when she smelled them, she noticed they had no scent. Like birds of the air, fish glided over her head. There were whole schools of golden fish bright with sunlight, there were carp with red fins, silvery trout and strange silly burbot, motionless in the water with only their gills moving as if talking to themselves.

Now the lake king led her deeper still.

“This is my banqueting hall,” he said, “and this is where we shall celebrate our wedding.”

She looked around and found herself in a deep green vale. High above her a crystalline green dome seemed to arch with a great golden lamp in the centre. This was the sun shining through the waters.

Then the lake king reached for his harp and said: “Now I shall play for you.”

At the first note Agneta thought her heart would break. The sound was wonderful and painful at the same time, and her eyes filled with tears. But when the lake king began to sing, all sorrow and pain vanished, and all joy as well, for everything was forgotten. She forgot her father’s castle and her happy childhood. She forgot her father’s love and the memory of her mother. She forgot that she had grown up on earth and had once looked up at the sky. She forgot the summer roses in the castle gardens and she forgot the snowflakes of winter, the incense in the church, and the candles on the altar. The only thing she remembered was the lake king, and she longed for nothing else but to be at his side for the rest of her life and to hear him playing.

When he had finished playing, he said to her: “Now you shall be my queen and stay with me for ever. Do you wish for that, my dear Agneta?”

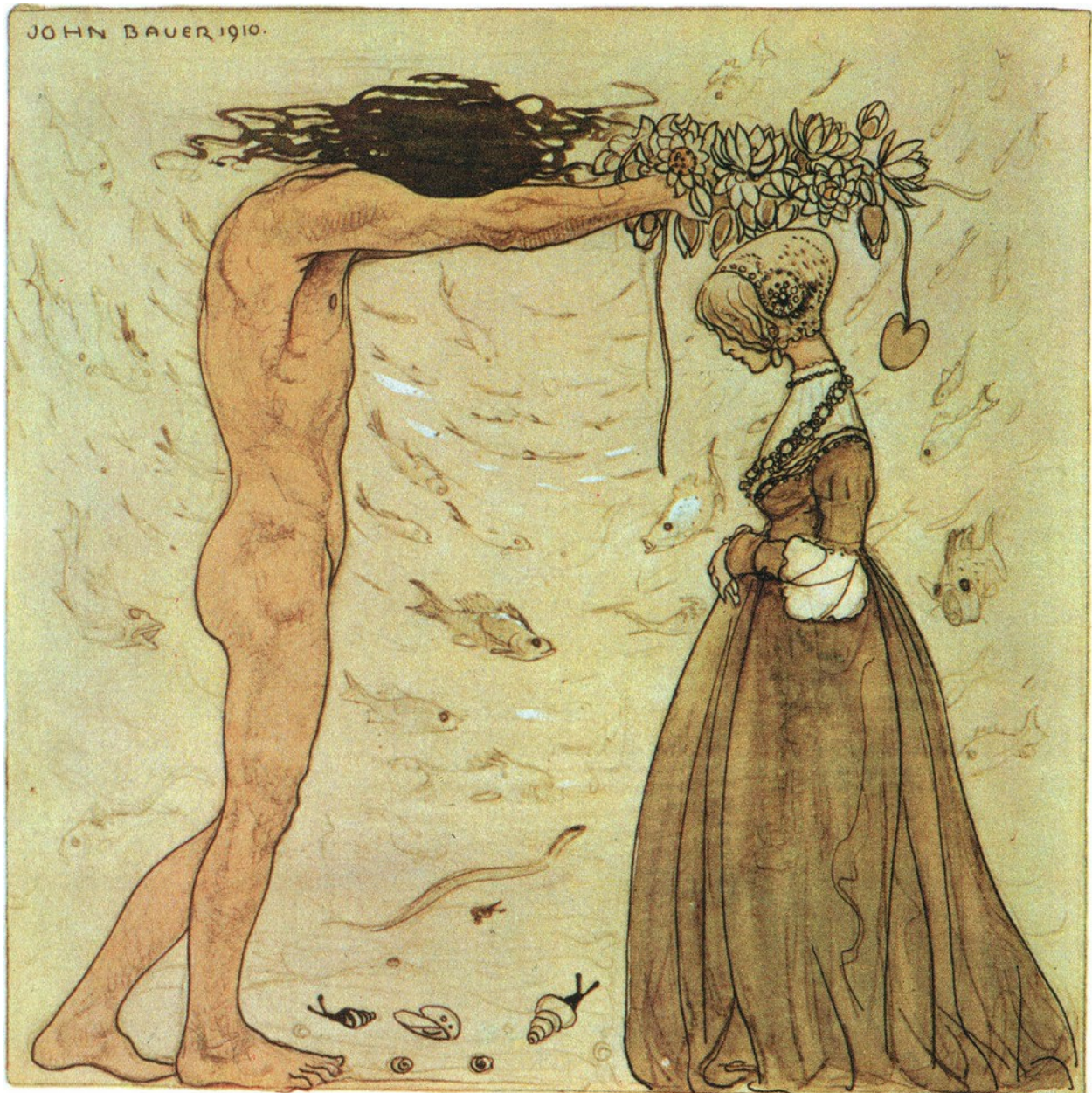
“Yes, yes!” she cried.

The lake king made her a crown of white water-lilies and set it on her head, and from that moment on, she was his queen.

In time she got to know the whole kingdom of the lake king. It was much bigger than she imagined. Following a river, it was even possible to reach the sea. What joy it gave them both when the lake king embraced her waist and they glided along the river like birds flying through the air. The reeds at the water’s edge bowed low as they passed. The river became broader and broader until it opened into the wide, infinite sea.

But Agneta was not allowed to come to the surface of the water, for the lake king feared that she would remember everything she had left behind on the earth, and that she would long for it again.





For seven years Agneta was the wife of the lake king and in that time gave birth to seven sons. All seven were like their father, and had the same big, dark eyes. The youngest was still in the cradle.

One Sunday morning, Agneta stood at the reed cradle and sang for the little one while the other children were outside playing among the waves. She did not know it was Sunday, for all the days, all the years had become the same. But now she distinctly heard the sound of bells – “ding, dong, ding, dong” –



reaching to the very bottom of the lake. She lifted her head and listened.

“Those are bells!” Agneta thought. “I have heard those before... but where?”

And suddenly the image of a church rose before her inward eye, the arches, the candles at the altar, the loud organ. With a sigh she left the cradle, went to the lake king and asked him: “Let me go up to the church! Please let me go! It has been such a long time since I’ve been there.”

The lake king looked at her in alarm. How had she suddenly remembered her earlier life?

“You want to go to church? Why specially today?” he asked.

“I suddenly feel such a longing for it,” she answered. “I feel as if I would die if you don’t let me go.”

“Fine, you shall go,” replied the lake king. “But you first have to promise me to come back before evening. All your children will long for the hour of your return.”

“Of course I’ll return!” said Agneta and smiled. “Do you think I could be happy without you, without the children, without the youngest in his cradle?” And she bent down and kissed her sleeping boy.

“Good. Then follow me,” said the lake king. Like an arrow he shot up to the surface with her, and he sat her on the end of the castle pier. Then he disappeared back into the depths.

Agneta’s head was suddenly all mixed up. She shaded her eyes with her hand, for the sun was so much stronger than she was used to, and everything around had such clear and bright colours. When she looked again, she recognized her father’s castle, rising strong and mighty as at the time she had left, and from the gardens around the park came the scent of lime-blossoms and roses. The swallows flew swiftly over her head with loud cries, and the sound of bells filled the air. Now she saw the church – the door was open – and as quick as she could she ran there.

The service had begun. Among the people kneeling down was an old man, dressed in the fine garb of a knight. His beard was long and white, and his face was buried in his hands. But Agneta recognized him immediately. It was her father. She saw how the tears ran down his hands and his chest laboured as he breathed, and she knew why he was so sad. At the back of the church where she stood, she sank to her knees and wept as if her heart would break.

The service lasted a long time. The clouds of incense rose and the candles

on the altar burnt low, the organ played louder and louder, and song filled the building. But then it was as if a cloud passed outside. The church became dark, and Agneta saw how the pictures of the saints turned away. Then she noticed that the church door had opened, and the lake king stood there.

“Agneta” he whispered, “come with me. You have been away for so long.”

She did not answer, but buried her face in her hands, then he touched her shoulder and she felt a shudder of fear go through her body.

“Agneta,” he pleaded with a soft voice. “Your children are longing for you! Don’t let them wait for you in vain.”

She shook her head and folded her hands.

“Agneta,” he said again, this time his voice sounded so sad that she could hardly bear to listen. “The little one in the cradle is longing for you. He is crying, because he cannot see you.”

Now Agneta turned to face the lake king. Her face was white with pain, but she said with a strong voice. “They shall wait in vain. You, too, can wait in vain for as long as you want. None of you will make me return to your realm. Leave me!”

The lake king sighed so deeply, that all the candle flames in the church quivered.

“Agneta, look at me” he pleaded.

But she did not raise her face. She kneeled on the spot as still as a statue. Then the lake king slowly departed. Agneta felt a cold draft as he opened the door. As soon as he had left, the pictures of the saints turned to her again. The sun shone out from behind the clouds and filled the church with its warm rays, and everyone stood to leave. When Agneta’s father came to the church door, he stood rooted as if seeing a ghost. Was it possible? Could it be his long-lost daughter?

Agneta went to him and threw her arms around him, saying: “Yes, it’s me, your Agneta. I was away for a long time in the castle of the lake king, but now at last I have returned to earth, and will stay here.”

And hand in hand, rejoicing, father and daughter went outside into the warm sunshine.

